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# Management Issues Analysis Team Research Report

Nike, 'The Girl Effect', and employment practices in Vietnam and Japan

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## Abstract

This paper examines the case of the sporting apparel manufacturer, Nike, and some of its employment practices in Vietnam. While an important contributor to global economic development, Nike's role in Vietnam and in many other developing economies has attracted considerable attention in Western media in particular, with the focus placed on its employment practices, especially in relation to young women. In response to the claims by western analysts that Nike exploits the labour force and twists the nature of specific economies, the Nike Foundation has produced a campaign it refers to as the 'Girl Effect' which it argues enables young women to become productive, independent and enabled individuals. Starting with the orientation that Nike is an exploitative employer, this paper attempts to deconstruct the Girl Effect by questioning the basis of the program, and then locating Nike within Vietnam. It then compares the nature of work in contemporary Vietnam with working conditions in 1950s and 60s Japan, and the impact of such policies on women's life and work in contemporary Japan and Vietnam.

## Introduction

In March 2015 90,000 workers at Vietnam's foreign shoe factories went on strike to protest exploitative employment conditions. These workers were employed by Nike and Adidas, and more than 90 percent of them were women. Many of the predominantly young women were employed on a contract basis, and most were under 25 years of age. The employment of young women by foreign corporations for extremely low wages in Vietnam was, and indeed still is the norm. Competitive advantage is the meme that the large corporations from overseas want to enact, and there is little doubt that regardless of the adverse publicity generated about these companies' employment practices over the years, their focus on exploiting young, skilled and trainable women workers has not changed.

Starting in 1996 with the establishment of the Vietnam Labor Watch, industrial action began based on attempting to make foreign companies in Vietnam accountable for their employment practices. This led to a series of strikes and industrial stoppages from 1997, which attracted considerable global attention, and in turn led to Nike and other manufacturers having to take action to address some of

their more problematic concerns. While Nike boasted that it had the best employment practices in place for its women workers, the New York Times in 1997 ran a piece that stated this was not in fact the case. In actuality Nike was buying goods from its Korean subcontractors in Vietnam who were paying their workers \$10 a week for a 65 hour working week. This incredibly low labour cost and the resulting low cost of the subcontracted products no doubt contributed to Nike's 1997 sales of \$9.2 billion and its profit of \$800 million (Steven Greenhouse, New York Times, 8 November, 1997). Moreover, as the New York Times went on to state, it was clear that working conditions for workers were unsafe, unsanitary, and in violation of the International Labour Organization's regulations.

As Beder noted (2002), Nike does not actually manufacture any products at all. It subcontracts its entire production. Nike designs, markets and sells its products to retailers. This is possible through the implementation of its subcontracting, advertising and retailing strategies, maintaining its low labour and materials inputs, high advertising expenditure, high profits and high executive salaries and big sponsorship deals for athletes. Many high profile sportspeople have signed up with Nike, in almost all major sporting codes, including Michael Jordan (basketball), Tiger Woods (golf), Rafael Nadal, Serena Williams and Roger Federer (tennis), Manchester City, Tottenham Hotspur and Chelsea (English Premier League football), FC Barcelona, Atletico Madrid (Spanish football), more than half the world's national football teams, Simone Biles (gymnastics), most of the basketball teams and players in the US NBA and so on.

The high profile nature of the company, its high profile sports stars, its economic successes and its desirability as a consumer brand in the United States and most other first world nations makes Nike stand out as a global sporting goods company *par excellence*. As stated above, Nike is a global contractor and marketing machine rather than a manufacturing company. Nevertheless its success is dependent on its astute use of subcontracting networks across the globe, with particular emphasis placed in Asia.

This paper's focus on Vietnam and Nike has as its core the contradiction in terms between Nike's publicity for its activities and the reality of conditions in which the workers labour who produce goods that are marketed with the Nike brand. Contrasting the 'Girl Effect' propaganda campaign driven by Nike with the working conditions experienced by girls who work for Nike clearly illustrates the global hypocrisy of the company. By examining the nature of corporate philanthropic discourse on one hand, and historical similarities with other examples, particular Japan's early postwar development, we are able to critically assess the nature of the Girl Effect campaign in a context that speaks to issues of human rights and global ethics.

## **Nike, Vietnam and the United States**

In 2014 Nike's largest production centre was in Vietnam, where it employed through its subcontracting network 330,000 workers, mostly young women, in 67 factories, and produced \$491 million of athletic footwear products that were exported to the United States (Institute for Global Labor and Human Rights, 2015:p3). Nike's revenues for 2015 were \$30.3 billion. The workers for Nike were paid between 48 and 69 cents an hour in January 2015, double their 2012 salaries, yet still well below subsistence levels in Vietnam (ibid). Unsurprisingly, the average declared cost of a pair of shoes for customs clearance into the United States was almost unimaginably low: less than \$6 a pair for shoes that routinely retailed in the United States for over \$100 (ibid).

The above statistics illustrate some of the inherent inequities associated with contracting offshore production of US-owned patented products to developing economies with very low wages. The quality of the products made in Vietnam was of a standard that equalled or surpassed products made in China or Thailand, but the wages paid to the (mostly) women who worked in the subcontractors responsible for the production of the Nike sports shoes were considerably less. Minimum wages were lower than in Mexico, a half the minimum wage in Peru, and a third the minimum wage in Chile (ibid: p.7). Circumstances for the young women who labour for Nike were so dire that in March 2015 90,000 workers who were employed by a Nike and Adidas subcontractor went on strike, as we saw above. The terms they wanted involved being made eligible for a lump sum payment when they leave their employers, rather than being forced to wait until they retire to have access to the funds. According to a Bloomberg News report,

"None of us has a house," striking worker Nguyen Van Thu, 28, said outside the gates of the shoe factory. "When we can't work, we want to get our social insurance all at once so we can build a house for the family. We struggle to make a living. We have to pay for all kinds of insurance, and we're afraid we'll lose it under the new law" (Bloomberg News, March 31, 2015).

It was unusual for Vietnamese workers to go on strike over such conditions, but according to the report above, this action was taken to lodge a protest over the government's inability to rein in the power of foreign corporations and their employment practices in Vietnam (ibid). The government has typically taken a hard line on labour strikes in Vietnam, and has severely punished those who lead actions against foreign corporations. This is largely because the Vietnamese government wants to ensure that the workers continue to support the larger scale notions of expanding the nation's

economic activities by retaining the Vietnamese competitive advantage of having cheap, skilled female labour:

'This edge appears to be working well in the context of rising labor costs in China and political mayhem in Thailand... They [foreign and local companies] warn any further wage hikes will cause grave consequences on Vietnam's competitiveness in the near term, adding it needs to be considered 'very carefully.'" — Thanh Nien News, 'Vietnam Approves Minimum Wage Hike of 15 Percent in 2015,' November 11, 2014.

In the context of the expanding nature of Vietnam's national economy, and its need to continue to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) from multinational corporations for its national revenues, the situation of Nike is quite significant. As a major employer – albeit indirectly – of Vietnamese women workers in an industry that supplies US consumers directly, its employment policies have serious ramifications for society and economics in Vietnam on the one hand, and for US consumers concerned about ethical purchases, on the other.

### **The Girl Effect**

In response to global concerns about the nature of Nike's exploitative employment practices the company established a non profit arm called 'The Nike Foundation' and in 2008 developed the 'Girl Effect' platform, with the intention of watering down some of the international criticisms of its employment policies, through taking philanthropic action to support those the company had traditionally exploited in the workplace. In simple terms the 'Girl Effect' is a campaign designed to 'alleviate poverty' and transform the health and life expectancy of those in the developed world by empowering young women to pursue their modified life goals and to embrace the values of liberalism and global corporatism (Nike 2009):

As a company, Nike believes in the power of human potential. That's why we invest in and support the Girl Effect, the idea that adolescent girls have a unique potential to end poverty for themselves and the world.

When a girl has self-belief and is supported by her family and community; when she's empowered with skills, ideas and knowledge; when she has access to services, role models and other girls: when she is visible and vocal - she can demand to stay in school, to get healthcare, and to get married and have children when she chooses.

We work with girls and those around them to create active champions of a world in which she reaches her full potential and the cycle of poverty is disrupted.

How we're creating a new normal

Grounded in our theory of change, our unique approach to social norm change uses the latest 21st century tools such as mass and social media, technology and girl-centred community engagement to challenge individual and social barriers that hold girls and their communities back (Nike Foundation, Girl Effect <http://www.girleffect.org/our-purpose/>)

Nike has continued to pursue this approach to justifying its employment practices over the past decade with varying degrees of success. Based around a premise that 'girl power' lies at the centre of attempts to reconstruct the modern world and to ensure that young women globally are part of a movement that celebrates female-ness, and that young women consumers in first world societies are able to support and promote the actions of their sorority in the South, the Girl Effect program has had mixed receptions. Surprisingly to this author, recognition of the cynical nature of the program has not really been the dominant response on a global level.

In Vietnam young women's home and family lives are compromised, their working lives harsh, poorly paid, and incompatible with first world aspirations, and the opportunities to bring themselves out of their institutionalised poverty and third world working and living conditions powerfully influenced by the employment strategies of the Nike corporation in the United States. This is in contradistinction to the stated aims of Nike's the Girl Effect. So what exactly is the Girl Effect? To best answer this question we need to first look at Nike's strategy for profiting from the employment of young women, and then move onto the implementation of this strategy.

Maria Hengeveld, reporting for 'The Grind' in 2016 perhaps most succinctly describes the Girl Effect program:

Just as Nike has worked hard in recent years to elevate the status of women on the field and court, it's been successful doing the same in the world of global philanthropy. Ever since the Nike Foundation launched the "Girl Effect" campaign in 2008—arguing that empowering and preparing girls to work is the key to lifting the developing world out of destitution—the company has left its brand all over the global anti-poverty field. The idea: that liberating girls from oppressive social norms and cultures, keeping them healthy and in school, will unleash their earning potential and "break the cycle of global poverty." (2016, p.1)

What is perhaps most surprising about Nike's foray into the anti-poverty philanthropy field is the level of support for the idea that impoverished, selfless teenaged girls with limited opportunities in life and in their own cultures can 'break the cycle of global poverty'. UNICEF, The World Bank, Michelle and Barrack Obama, the Gates Foundation and a broad range of feminist action groups have all supported the Nike Foundation's program at some stage since its inception.

At the outset, however, it is perhaps understandable that some would support what appears to be a philanthropic initiative. An example of the type of program that is supported by the Girl Effect campaign is the case of Anita Kumari, a girl from a south Indian village, who at 15 years of age decided that she would become a beekeeper. Refusing to accept an arranged marriage, she went on a hunger strike to resist, and was successful. In 2011 she was at university studying beekeeping, her tuition paid for by the Foundation. The perception that impoverished young women in third world countries can be empowered to resist the status quo, and be able to become whatever it is they wish is the foundational ideology of Girl Effect. And it is this idealistic goal that Nike wishes to see become an international norm, apparently:

"Adolescent girls in poverty face dead ends and we gotta get to them before that happens, so that's the inspiration for this work," says Maria Eitel, president of the foundation, a grant-making arm of the athletic-wear company [...] Ms. Eitel says Girl Effect was born out of her feeling that the foundation should tackle larger issues, and she settled on poverty [and] decided that girls would become a foundation priority (Bermudez, C, 2011).

On the surface, therefore, it is apparent that the Nike Foundation and the Girl Effect program have some substance, supported by a large number of philanthropists, human rights campaigners, and international banking consortiums. And there is little doubt that in some societies the Foundation's focus on young women's lives, their rights to choose when (and whom) to marry, when (and if) to have children, when and where to be educated, when and where to work etc has had some positive impacts. For a company with a multi billion dollar turnover even the relatively small expenditure of millions of dollars on re-education programs in some poverty stricken nations of Africa have had powerful impacts in the nature of discourse about girls and their futures.

It is however important for us not to be taken in by the corporate argument that philanthropy needs company ties. While it is absolutely crucial that young women in nations in which gender discrimination is the norm can rise to positions of power and influence if such nations are to attain international standing and economic success, it is important also to acknowledge that young women do not need the assistance of external forces of capitalism to make such dreams real. Indeed those

external forces invariably will have at their heart their own interests, at the expense of others'. This is the nature of 'corporate philanthropy' after all.

It is equally important to acknowledge that the discourse of women's empowerment, a central tenet of contemporary western liberalism, does not necessarily have echoes in other non-western, non-liberal societies and culture. Moreover the idea young women become 'capable' in the context of liberal discourse is a focus of the Nike Foundation's approach to 'enabling' girls to lead the world out of poverty. This discourse shifts the onus of changing the world to the least empowered group (poverty stricken young girls), while attempting to shift the focus away from the more blatant and onerous structural factors – religious bigotry, xenophobia, corporate power, multinational exploitation of global labour markets, multinational exploitation of global resources, debt, financial crises etc (see Hickel, for a sophisticated deconstruction of some of these factors).

However, it is incumbent upon us to assess carefully the nature of the rationales for the actions taken by the Nike Foundation, and to assess also the nature of employment of specifically young women in nations yet to have been visited by the goodness of the Girl Effect campaign. In this context it is useful to turn our attention to Vietnam and to Nike's production facilities there. The argument that subcontractors are separate entities to their corporate contractors is moot here, as the products that are made are sold on in their entirety as products of the original brand.

### **Nike in Vietnam**

Nike started operations in Vietnam in 1995, when it opened five contract footwear factories. By 2005 it was operating a further 4 factories and employing 130,000 Vietnamese workers, who collectively produced \$782 million of exports, which amounted to 3 percent of Vietnam's total exports (Nike News, 2005). By 2017 the company employed a total of 350,000 Vietnamese, mostly young women from rural areas, in their contractors' factories to make athletic shoes almost exclusively for the US market. Most of these employees from the rural areas live in dormitories owned or leased by the contractors. In 2015 the average age of the women workers was 23 years, and the average income was less than \$200 per month, less than one quarter the Vietnamese subsistence level (Hengeveld, 2016).

After a two year study of Nike owned contractors in Vietnam, Hengeveld wrote a report published in *The Grind* and in partnership with the Investigative Fund of the Nation Institute. She was highly cynical about the intentions behind the Girl Effect campaign, given the extremely antagonistic working conditions experienced by the young women in the plants, and the intransigence of either

the contractor or Nike to alter working conditions. "We have voices," a 32-year-old pregnant worker, who receives a small hazardous work bonus for her work in the gluing section and fears the effects of chemicals on her unborn baby, said. "But we can't really speak" (Hengeveld, 2016). Not only are women who are pregnant not given any special dispensations, in fact they are also often summarily dismissed when they become unable to carry out the physically arduous work on production lines. There is simply no hope that they will be redeployed, or indeed reemployed after they have the baby. Equally there is obviously no maternity leave available for these women.

Hengeveld states:

Of the 14 women I interviewed who are currently employed, 11 reported excessively high work pressure, frequent or occasional humiliation, insults, threats, intimidation, harassment, and abuse by their managers. Their managers, these women told me, call them stupid, shout at them, and threaten to have them fired if they complain about the work pressure or low pay (*ibid*).

Other working conditions have been documented: workers routinely collapsing unconscious at their work stations from overwork and excessive heat, then being forced to return to work minutes after waking up; managers hurling epithets, often vulgar, at the mainly female workforce; absurd work rules, like a ban on yawning; the routine firing of pregnant workers; harassing workers for using the bathroom, including photographing them when they enter and exit; and also illegal overtime requirements that were not waived even for a worker who needed to attend a family funeral (Scott Nova, WRC, cited in Hengeveld, 2016).

Such stories are common in all sociological investigations of the company's activities in third world nations. However Nike's stories are somewhat different, as are the stories of governments. Nike's versions emphasise the good that is generated to the economy as a whole, and the importance of economic and technical development, plus of course, the benefits to the 300,000 plus workers who have jobs because of the corporation's activities in Vietnam, in this case.

Where is the cost of a shoe located? The diagram below is a representation of Nike's manufacturing activities in Indonesia, with its retail in the United States. Although this is an Indonesian example, it is applicable in principle to the Vietnamese case as similar design, manufacturing, marketing and sales strategies are applied there.





Source: Doris Lyons, 'Investigating Global Issues: the role of internationalism' Ch14, 308-315(2016).

Available at: <http://slideplayer.com/slide/10919351/>

Given that Nike's production in Vietnam is highly profitable, and recognising that many of the contractors there are from Korea and Taiwan (source: ILO, 2016), there are issues that generate considerable friction in Vietnam within the body of labourers. Not only are Vietnamese being exploited by US multinationals, they are also being exploited by Korean and Taiwanese multinationals. Moreover the young women who work for these contractors are being verbally, economically, and in some cases physically abused by management from other Asian nations. In combination with examining closely the business models applied in the graphic above it is clear that they generate some problematic issues that surround the discourse about Nike 'helping' poor young girls 'change the world'.

Nike Foundation's position is that the poorest girls, given opportunities, can really end poverty by becoming empowered through learning and work. If the poorest sector of society can raise their standards, all others can too. As we saw above, the philosophy behind this approach has severe limitations, but it has not dissuaded a number of mostly liberal western philanthropic organisations and NGOs to invest in the premise, many of them blindsided by the emphasis on 'helping girls' globally, which of course is not a bad thing to do! The irony of this approach is that they are (perhaps unconsciously) contributing, along with Nike, to one of the more extreme examples of long-term disempowerment of women through retaining women in ongoing low paid and skilled labour, in turn reinforcing the global status quo of iniquitous relations between North and South. That is, cheap women's labour produces high value goods at a low labour cost primarily for consumption by privileged others in the developed world.

However, regardless of how the position is spun, it has significant long term problems, as seen in many nations that were dependent on cheap women's labour in early development phases. Contemporary Vietnam's labour relations, its labour structure and its exploitation of young women factory workers is similar to other nations in East and Southeast Asia that have gone through similar development phases. Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong have all depended on cheap, skilled young female labour in their emergence as newly industrialised economies in the years after World War 2. Relying heavily on technology and knowledge from overseas, and on foreign direct investment in the early years of industrialisation, combined with dependence on markets located in the developed world, these nations share a history of gender discrimination and exploitation, and of North-South discrimination.

As Japan and the Four Tigers (Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore) became more wealthy through the 1980s and 90s, and as wealth was more equitably distributed within the nations, demands for higher wages and better working conditions became part of the nature of industrial relations. These demands, coupled with the high quality production of goods and services for foreign markets led to a significant shift away from cheap female labour-dependent industries to more service related industries. In short, the cost of labour increased to such an extent that it became less and less attractive for foreign investors to procure contracts in these nations for manufacturing, leading to the development of a second tier of contracting of production. In Asia, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and Bangladesh are currently attracting a considerable amount of foreign direct investment in response to their low wages, ready availability of government support, low taxation for foreign investors, and highly skilled young women workers. To put the Vietnam case in perspective it might be appropriate to briefly examine the similarities with the Japanese case in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when Japan was dependent on overseas technology, US trade support, and cheap female labour.

### **Japan versus Vietnam**

In 2017 Vietnam's labour relations, its industrial structure, its rural out-migration, its gender relations, and its reliance on foreign investment at the outset appear quite similar to those of Japan in the 1950s and 1960s. Japan had a very high rate of rural urban migration, as young women in the postwar generations were attracted to work in urban or peri-urban areas, chasing employment in the new factory towns that were springing up as Japanese companies and US companies worked together in newly developing technology industries in particular. A very high percentage of workers in factories was women; indeed they accounted for the vast majority of workers. From a corporate

perspective this was inevitable because women were able to be employed as part-timers, hence wages were saved on paying benefits available to men; women were dismissed if they became pregnant – there was no childcare available, nor demands for it by unions, dominated by male workers (Saso, 1990); women were easily replaced by other women in times of economic difficulties, the so-called 'reserve labour army' thesis proposed by Karl Marx; and women's primary responsibilities were seen to revolve around the household, hence working in factories was seen as 'supplementary' income generation, and women were therefore not represented in industrial action (Hein, 1993).

Moreover, in Japan the rapid pace of industrialisation and urbanisation led to the production of new accommodations for workers, and the creation of new types of urban lifestyles. Women were the bearers of multiple burdens in this new society that pushed capitalism to its limit: they were producers of capital; they were reproducers; they were carers in the household; and they were responsible for the welfare of the older generations (Saso, 1990). Importantly there was little recognition among male policy makers and power holders of the multiple burdens and limited life choices faced by many women. However, the production of new industries and the development of new urban, peri-urban and suburban communities led to the development of domestic consumerism in ways that had not been experienced before (Kelly, 1993).

Given the circumstances found in Vietnam's Nike contractors' factories it is indeed arguable that similarities between nations 40-50 years apart are significant and relevant to perceptions of future growth and maturity of Vietnamese economy. While the historical context is entirely different today, the global relevance of Vietnam's expansion during China's rise to power is important to note, as is the nature of Vietnam's modern socialism, a shift from the immediate post-Vietnam War years. However, just as Japan employed a planned market economy (Eccleston, 1989) so too does Vietnam. The nature of the actual economic theorising may differ, but the principle of planning an economy with the assistance of knowledge, technology and capital from overseas, while employing ostensibly the least valuable human resource as a lynchpin for overall economic growth is very familiar to students of the 1960s Japanese economy.

Just as Japanese society and culture was forced to mature and develop knowledge industries, service industries and shift from being strongly dependent on rural production to becoming increasingly dependent on industrial, post-industrial and financial industries, Vietnam is currently facing a similar position. The movement of workers from the countryside to cities is increasingly rapid, as the cities continue to expand quickly, and while there are of course dissimilarities with respect to the actual types of labour, the systems of governance and the companies and industries

involved, it does appear that there are still many elements in common. In particular the ongoing exploitation of rural women in industry is strongly reminiscent of the Japanese case.

Using Japan as a point of comparison, is it possible to perhaps predict impacts in the socio-economic landscape in Vietnam in the coming years? This may be altogether too difficult for a paper such as this, but it is an opportunity to ask some interesting questions of the trajectory that Vietnam appears to be pursuing, in concert with foreign capital, and Nike in particular (in this case).

The first question is, is the gap between the rural and urban likely to close? And what can Japan tell us about this? Japan's rural economy is today propped up by protectionism, high subsidies, and government support through food security arguments. It is arguable that Japan's agriculture sector is globally uncompetitive, and that it is only through the subsidies that farmers receive that even dietary staple crops such as rice and soy beans are able to be produced in Japan at a profit for farmers. It is also clear that the hollowing out of rural areas has not slowed even as the economy continues to mature in Japan.

Today Vietnam also is facing similar food and agricultural pressures to those of Japan in the 1950s and 60s. The nation needs to ensure food security, but it also needs to acknowledge the need for technology and knowledge transfers, and the need for wide scale employment in industry outside agriculture. The government also needs to ensure agricultural sustainability in the face of globalization pressures. Yet Vietnam's government is different to Japan's, and runs different agendas, including the need for the retention of 'market socialism'

In Japan's case, the exploitation of women as a 'reserve army' of disposable labour that could be expanded or reduced at corporations' whims created some serious lags in consciousness among women, and among power holders – mostly geriatric male lawmakers. Often justified as 'Confucian' in orientation, a large number of political actions effectively disempowered women, retarded gender equality, and led to differential employment platforms that still exist today (Ueno 2004). While there have been considerable advances in gender equality in Japan over the last couple of decades, there is little doubt that Japanese women's political circumstances lag behind most western nations'.

## **Conclusion**

So, in the context of Nike's powerful representation on the global stage, its domination of its advertising by Wieden-Kennedy, the company responsible for advertising for the firm since the 1980s with a budget of over \$1 billion for 2017-18, and its employment of 350,000 plus workers in

Vietnam working for the minimum wage, where does that leave the young Nike workers? How can women be guaranteed human rights, dignity and reasonable wages in a globalized economy in which they remain at the bottom? And how do rural girls resist the power of Nike and other companies to dominate their lives? These are vexing questions to which currently there are few answers.

How does Vietnam move onto the next level of egalitarian economic development? Can examples like Japan or South Korea be used? Do women in Confucian based societies have bigger hurdles to overcome than those from western societies? How do gender and the rural-urban gap speak to each other? Can the rural-urban gap be closed? And can foreign companies play a role in narrowing this divide? In respect to the last question, many foreign observers think that the companies can in fact play a role in narrowing the divide between rural and city workers, and between men and women workers. While it is clear that in Confucian societies there is a powerful early developmental inclination to exploit young women workers in the interest of capital, when foreign investment with foreign shareholders is introduced there can be different dimensions of power expressed. One of these was made apparent with the Girl Effect, as we saw above.

While western commentators continue to rant about the clearly unequal nature of Nike's employment and manufacturing processes, and others demand that large multinational companies are made to be responsible global corporate citizens, responses are most commonly measured in actions that have little bearing on the ground, so to speak. The Nike Foundation's Girl Effect program is a cleverly conceived conceit that speaks to liberal western critics of globalism, focuses on the young women who are exploited in many nations by the Nike corporation as the solution to the problem of their own exploitation, and glibly encourages westerners to absorb the 'humanitarian' nature of the enterprise that looks to 'empower' impoverished young women. As Koffman et al (2015), have eruditely argued, the Girl Effect which centres around 'the girl' as both the agent of change and the object of change, generates a new level of discourse that corporations are disinclined to recognise as valid:

it captures the turning of the humanitarian gaze away from the those in need and onto the individual donor; and it highlights the reframing of 'helping others' in terms of entrepreneurial and narcissistic self-work (p.158)

This is not about helping empower girls. Nor is it about helping relieve the circumstances of their exploitation. It is a cynical corporate gambit focused on retaining the status quo as long as possible so that the corporate body can stand to profit as much as possible throughout this period. At the same time it is a sleight of hand that generates a considerable amount of narcissistic self-satisfaction

among contributors to the program who can feel that they have 'helped' other, less fortunate girls while being able to continue to consume the product that has been marketed to them as desirable. In the meantime, the global structural inequalities continue, and the women workers struggle in difficult, poorly paid circumstances. In short, as the final graphic illustrates Nike remains dependent on globally connected forms of wage slavery.



Source: Ifath N. Iftikhar

Global peace and Conflict: Nike and Modern Day Slavery

(<https://globalpeaceandconflict.wordpress.com/2012/02/23/nike-and-modern-day-slavery/>)

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